Privilege, an Honour and a Pleasure: Providing palliative care to cancer patients and their families

by Audrey Cianfarani

I am an RPN and I have worked on a Palliative Care unit in a General Hospital for over 12 years. I wish to share my story with you in regards to a special patient named Mary and her family as they travelled on their private cancer journey battling and coming to terms with a terminal and end of life illness.

The narrative that I wish to relate seems like it took place only yesterday but in reality was six years ago. Mary was a 76 year old female with a diagnosis of breast cancer. She had been dealing with this health reality and the prescribed treatment regime for many months. Mary was a very petite person with a beautiful smile, personality and a Scottish accent. She was a retired office worker and a divorced mother of two grown sons. Her boys thought the sun shone and set on their mom and the feelings were mutual from the other side of the coin.

In the following expose, I will incorporate your guiding principles to recount a story that is not only genuine and true but is also full of amazing courage and grace, tranquility and peace. I am sure you already know that these are the extraordinary people that leave you with a memory that is so startlingly vivid and transforming that your own personal life is changed in some way forever and the experience is never, ever forgotten.

The value of being a palliative care/oncology nurse is without a doubt the patients and their families. They are the real heroes. They are the natural teachers and mentors and all they ask in return is that you listen, learn and carry on their legacy to help someone else.

The reason for Mary’s admission to our unit was excruciating pain due to a spinal cord compression which left her lower back and limbs paralyzed. Mary’s stay with us was almost six months. The biggest challenge that we faced was trying to bring her pain under control and believe me when I reiterate that this was one monumental task for everyone on the health care team each and every shift and each and every day.

After several weeks with us, with the help of a PCA pain pump and medications such as ativan, haldol and gabapenten this gentle lady finally benefitted from much needed pain relief.

As you can imagine, throughout this lady’s illness trajectory the pain experience for her was all encompassing and exhausting especially when she needed to be turned. To reduce the discomfort, anxiety and psychological turmoil she was gently turned and repositioned via the log roll method.

Caring for this individual was always a “Privilege, an Honour and a Pleasure”. Supporting her sons was an absolute must so that they would be able to be there for their mom. Mary seemed so fragile and frail that providing her with the most comfort with the least distress was the ultimate goal and a “no brainer”.

For whatever the reasons, this lady and I shared a special bond and relationship connection. The love, understanding and most of all the trust that developed between the two of us was instantaneous, intuitional and natural. There are no words that would adequately begin to describe what we both felt. “It just was.” Who knows may be it was fate stepping in and lending her compassionate hand.

In the last month of this lady’s illness, although her pain was under much better control, her health status was steadily declining and deteriorating. Her constant companions of anxiety, discomfort and confusion prevented her from attaining any physical, emotional or psychological peace or solace.

Her eventual release from the heavy burden of this life time occurred one evening shift about 10:30 p.m. I went in the room to check on the status of this very ill patient. Amazingly, she was at peace and the most comfortable that I had ever seen her. I stayed and spent the time talking to her son. The conversation was centered around his mom and all the events and activities that had made his life and his brother’s so special and memorable.
As he talked and praised his mom for being such a strong woman and loving mother, we both noticed simultaneously the final changes of her last few minutes on this earth.

Both the son and I acknowledged this new reality with a knowing glance as he continued to speak softly and lovingly until her very last breath. The changes were subtle but oh, so gradual and graceful. It was as if her son was singing her a lullaby that was leading his mom straight to the gates of heaven. She was at such peace and the radiance upon her face in that moment in time spoke volumes. I was in awe and very humbled to have been a part of such a private, beautiful and breathtaking tribute and farewell.

It was with a sense of relief that Mary was finally released from her suffering into the arms of a loving, welcoming angel. For us, although sad and surreal this lady had truly returned home and was flying with the angels. At last, she had earned her wings and received much needed rest and peace.

How does any human being adequately and fittingly give the respect due to a special individual that in their own unique way unknowingly and unselfishly gave and taught you the simple lessons of courage, kindness and infinite patience?

This wonderful person taught me that the most valuable gift you can give to another is yourself. You will never, ever know the extent of the gift of being genuine and human. It has the ability to grow in ways that are unimaginable and unfathomable and which ultimately warms the heart long after the event has taken place.

My colleagues urged me to go home as by now I had completed my shift. “I said no and told them that I had one more final act of love to do”.

Before I left, I performed the one last gift I could give to Mary. I wrapped her body lovingly in preparation for her final earthly journey when her family would take the time and opportunity to say their goodbyes. It was my way of saying goodbye, thank you and I will miss you to a courageous friend. I could do no less.

On that most eventful winter’s evening, before I left work, I stopped by Mary’s room to extend my condolences once again and to offer a final goodbye to both sons who were sitting quietly at their mom’s bedside.

I also told them this in parting: Just as you will grieve at the loss of your mom and loved one, as a nurse and health care provider I will also mourn because I too, have lost a very unique and fragile connection with your mom and with you.

Remember, when you leave you will take a little piece of me with you. That tiny little piece is the hole left in my aching heart. That little piece of my heart I freely and without reservation give because you have given me more than I can ever repay. It is called “experience”.

Experience is what allows me to continue to grow and learn both as a professional and a person. It is that ethereal intuitional quality I confidently use to help others on their own personal journeys.

In conclusion, palliative care/oncology is a very special and unique area. The rewards are incalculable and the experience priceless. Excellence requires a willing heart, mind and soul and experience is knowing life is precious and must be shared with one another in order to become and remain whole.

The most meaningful aspect and greatest satisfaction of my practice is communication. I am only a facilitator using the tools and skills of my profession to provide optimal comfort and relief from discomfort, worries and burdens to patients and families. The biggest difference is literally stopping to take the time to listen, talk and to show by your actions your willingness to care for another human being. Their wellbeing significantly improves when access to their loved one’s caregiver is visible and only a call or question away. It may be a little thing but it is “a must” do item to achieving the highest level of patient and family satisfaction.

It is just like that old saying, “but for the grace of God go I”. It could be me reaching out for a friend or a friendly face in a time of need. “Being human is not always as easy as one might think but always worth the effort”.

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